Eyes Closed

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Eyes Closed

by EarthsickWithoutYou

Summary

After learning that his boyfriend Hannibal is the Chesapeake Ripper, Will breaks up with him and orders Hannibal not to harm anyone else or come near Will again. Even though Hannibal obeys the command and keeps his distance, Will is still heartbroken and depressed. Maybe a date with someone new can help him finally move on...

Okay, you know this won't work out as Will planned.

To be clear, this is one of those “Will hooks up with someone else but can’t help fantasizing about Hannibal” fics.

Takes place between Chapters 13-14 of my fic "Perfect Match". So, in case you were wondering what exactly happened when Will went out with Caleb...here you go.

Notes

cw: mentions of difficulties in eating due to stress and trauma.

Chapter 1

"*Everyone has a skeleton*
And a closet to keep it in
And you're mine"
-Ani DiFranco

Part One

Will's shopping list was simple, but he liked to go to the big, high quality grocery store in Baltimore rather than the run-down little market in Wolf Trap. The dogs deserved better food than he could make from what he could find there. So he tolerated the overly large place with its near-florescent lighting, cloying lite rock from satellite radio, and far too many people.

Just make your way from one aisle to the next, he reasoned with himself. *Stick to the list.*

He moved one foot in front of the other accordingly, wishing they didn't feel so heavy. At work earlier, he'd had an argument with Jack, which had zapped the scant amount of energy he had started the day with. Now it was evening and as usual he was starving with no desire to eat, and thoroughly drained with no desire to sleep. Surrounded by humans with no desire to do anything but hide from them, maybe become a full-on recluse. Why not? The dogs would love the extra time and attention.

The dogs.

Oh, right. The list.

Ground pork
Ground beef
Sweet potatoes
Apples
Carrots
Kale
Blueberries
Rice

This place did have great organic produce. Will filled his cart with enough to last the dogs a week, then proceeded to the items on his list that would comprise his own meals.

Plain Folgers coffee, Cheerios, milk, bananas. A few packs of hot dogs and cans of baked beans. Campbell's soup and white bread to soak it up so he could swallow down what small amount of solid food he could manage to endure.

Not for the first time, Will wondered if he should try subsisting on shakes, given that his body seemed to be rebelling against the concept of eating. But he didn't have time to learn how to make the shakes, or in fact to make them; it sounded complicated. He had his hands

full with caring for seven dogs, teaching, and solving murders for the FBI. Going crazy was also turning out to be a major time suck.

Since the blow-out with Hannibal, he'd been rendered a shaky nervous wreck. Food tasted either awful or was utterly flavorless, its texture was disgusting, and it took too much chewing to get it swallowed and *over* with so that he could survive another day, stave off the headaches and faintness that emerged when he skipped too many meals.

Eating made him remember that Hannibal had fed him human remains, and not just any. His ex-lover had been feeding him a steady diet of the very same people for whom Will tried to find justice. It was nauseating, but there was also a strange, horrifying pang of nostalgia, of loss and longing.

Cooking was an integral part of who Hannibal was. Meals together had been such a large part of their relationship, and for a while there they had been almost perfectly happy together. Or so he had thought. It was all a lie; Hannibal had been using him all along, and--

"Shit," Will muttered, patting himself down. In his tortured mental tangent, he'd somehow managed to drop his list on the floor, but who knew how many minutes ago that had been, or on which aisle.

"Is this yours?" a friendly male voice piped up from a few feet behind him.

Will turned to see a guy around his own age who looked familiar. How the hell did he know this man? He could have groaned in frustration; he *hated* running into people unexpectedly when he was out on errands. He never knew what to say, and it was never anyone he wanted to see.

The young man who came toward him with a good-natured smile and Will's shopping list held out in his hand had kind green eyes, thick reddish-blonde hair slicked back with fashionable flair, and a neat beard. He wore a blue and white floral seersucker shirt with navy slacks and Converse, almost like a more casual version of the way Hannibal dressed, with such easily flawless style--

Stop. Thinking. About. Hannibal!

"I found it on the floor and I thought--" The man glanced from the messily scrawled list on half-crumpled notebook paper in his hand to Will's baffled, annoyed expression. "Wait a minute, I know you!"

Oh, fuck, I don't have time for this.

Will forced a wretched smile. "Thank you, I must have dropped this," he mumbled, taking the list as their fingers brushed and the other man gazed at him with new interest.

He'd felt that gaze on him before, so instantly taken with Will for some ungodly reason --

"Will, isn't it? Will...Graham!" the guy said triumphantly. "I'm Caleb Thornton. I think we met a few times at my restaurant, Elixir?"

Fucking hell. The chef at the classy restaurant where Will had gone with Hannibal on more than a few dates.

“Yes, that must be it,” Will nodded, shaking his hand.

Caleb had nice hands, with long fingers and a sure, warm grip. His smile was sunny and benevolent. “So crazy to run into you like this.”

“You have a really great place, the food is amazing.” Will scratched a nonexistent itch behind one ear and adjusted his glasses.

He was directly interacting with another human, and hard as he tried to avoid the happenstance, he should probably do his best to follow the usual protocol of small talk. But the simple words he spoke sent recollections flickering across his mind like the shuddering glint of a movie camera on an old sheet, a sheet pinned to one wall of his memory palace. He kept ripping the sheet down, and yet somehow it was always there...

Elixir. A bottle of finest cabernet and a shellfish tower, his heart beating triple-time as flirtation blossomed deeper and fuller into romance. *100 Icebreaker Questions for Your First Date*--

Don’t think about Hannibal. He had not let these particular memories back in for so long that it felt like being punched in the gut out of nowhere. *Anything, do anything you have to, block it out, say something, do something, get him out of your head somehow.*

If Will let this go on much longer, he’d start hearing Hannibal’s voice again, deep, smooth, clear and tempting. He couldn’t let that happen.

“Oh, you’re too kind,” Caleb enthused, as if Will had a kind bone left in his body. “So, I see somebody’s going to be eating well this week.” He was looking at the top basket of Will’s cart, which was full of fresh, colorful fruits and vegetables, plus bags of rice and grains. “Do you like to cook?”

“It’s okay,” Will shrugged. “I make my dog’s food because I don’t trust the canned stuff.”

“Ah,” Caleb mused, starting to walk beside Will as Will kept himself in forward motion to try and control his frazzled nerves. “How many dogs’ve you got? Sorry, am I prying, by the way, should I leave you be?”

“No, that’s okay.”

And it was okay, suddenly, or it seemed to be. Why exactly should Will run in the other direction of this cordial, good-looking man who was engaging him in totally harmless conversation? Will was single; there was nothing wrong with him talking to someone who happened to have a really obvious crush on him. And God, he could use the distraction. What if this was just the medicine he needed to get Hannibal out of his system?

Don’t think about Hannibal.

“I have seven dogs,” Will resumed, picking up a can of mini-sized ravioli and figuring he may as well get a few of these, too, because the pasta would slide easily enough down his throat.

“Wow! That’s a lot of dogs, you must really love them.”

“I do,” Will smiled, relaxing a little more. “They’re uh...they’re wonderful company. I feel like they take care of me as much as I do for them. It’s hard to be stressed out when your dog wants you to throw a stick for him, or when you come home and they’re all excited, jumping up and barking for you.”

“I’m allergic, but that does sound great,” Caleb mused. “I have a goldfish I won at the state fair? I’ve kept it alive for a year and a half.”

Will made eye contact just to process the particular blend of humble, sweet-intentioned humor in Caleb’s words, then they both laughed.

“That’s outstanding,” Will congratulated. His ribs felt strange, sore and pleasant at the same time from the unaccustomed sensation of hearty laughter.

“His name’s Murray, and sometimes I talk to him. He’s a hell of a patient fish because I have some seriously absurd tangents. My headcanons on the new Star Wars movies alone?”

“That’s a really patient fish,” Will smiled with an aching stretch of his lips. He surveyed the Beefaroni and reached for a can, promoting Caleb to interrupt.

“Listen, can I offer you some free advice?” Caleb arched a brow, humor mingling with faux-severity in his tone.

“Hmm?”

“Put that back and get the Annie’s pasta instead. Chef Boyardee is terrible; even as a kid I couldn’t stand it.”

“I grew up on a lot of Spaghettios,” Will explained, not particularly caring about brand or flavor since he couldn’t taste anyway. Still, he replaced the subpar ravioli in his cart with the Annie’s, why not? “I guess I never really kicked the habit.”

“Oh, I always gravitate towards the foods of my childhood. I still get cravings for Velveeta mac’ n cheese, or those little bagel pizza bites sometimes.” Caleb’s presence felt comfortingly stable. Will leaned into it a little bit more.

“Did you grow up around here?”

“I’m from Delaware originally. Moved here for college, stayed for the restaurant scene. It was a nice fit for me as an up-and-comer. My brand of seafood-heavy, relaxed gourmet goes down well around here.” Caleb picked out a bottle of spicy mustard and tossed it into his own shopping basket.

A cursory glance made Will guess Caleb had only come in to grab a few quick essentials. His basket contained deli meat and cheese, plus a loaf of bakery rye bread.

“Just pickles left,” Caleb smiled, noticing Will noticing. “Admittedly, sometimes work wears me out so all I can do for myself at home is a cup of chowder and a sandwich, but! A great sandwich. We sold a ton of fried oysters and lobster tails today, and my fingers are kind of killing me.”

“Your customers are lucky to have you. Seafood is my favorite, too,” Will said, relaxing even more. He felt some of the stiffness in his shoulders releasing into near-normalcy, and the pain in his jaw faded slightly as he gritted his teeth less.

It was good to have a regular, innocuous conversation with someone down-to-earth. He was reminded of the way he felt when he spent time chatting with Beverly, and felt a quick twinge of guilt. He’d been avoiding her as much as possible lately because seeing her reminded him of the early days of dating Hannibal. Beverly’s suggestion that Will join a dating app had been instrumental in--

Don’t think about Hannibal--

“Will?” Caleb asked, pausing in the aisle as Will stood there still about 90% baffled and worn down by life, clutching his shopping cart like it would help keep him centered in the moment.

“Hmm?” Will replied, latching onto Caleb’s presence again to feel something like okay.

Caleb looked a bit nervous. “I guess I’m wondering if you’re still dating Dr. Lecter, but I know that’s none of my business. You don’t have to answer if I’m being inappropriate. You know, my ex used to say I’m about as subtle as a chainsaw in the flirtation department.”

It was true, but that was okay, too. Will laughed, shocking himself again at the genuine warmth of the sound. It was alien and came from somewhere very far away, but it was real. And Caleb was real.

“I’m not dating him anymore, we were together for a while, but it didn’t work out.” Will looked at Caleb beseechingly. “And I really can’t talk about it, or him.”

“That’s fine, I don’t want to talk about it or him,” Caleb smiled again, taking one step closer exactly. The distance between them was still entirely polite. They were the same height, so eye-to-eye was easy, even if Will couldn’t maintain it for too long. “I want to talk about you. Over drinks, maybe? Appetizers, if I’m going to be really ballsy about it? Might as well put myself out there, I’m pretty toughened up to rejection. But I’m eager about trying again in this cheerfully idiotic way I’ve just about perfected.”

“Why would I reject you, why would anyone? You seem great.” Will said this out of very basic common sense, without an iota of tender or flirtatious meaning. It seemed completely obvious that most people would be enchanted to go on a date with a handsome, smart, funny guy who could cook. However, it was clear that Caleb took his words far more seriously than they were intended.

His face lit up and he blushed. “Thank you, Will. So would you like to? Go have drinks and appetizers sometime? I know a place with amazing tapas on-- sorry, babbling, assuming. Chainsaw.”

Will laughed again. Caleb made this easy; all he had to do was coast along the wave of the other man’s interest, and it almost felt like his own. It was partially his empathy, partially Caleb being charming and fun to be around. He knew this was a treacherous proposition, way too much of a security blanket when he was freezing to death of loneliness, depression and despair.

But Caleb made it seem so easy.

“I’ll go, if you want to. When were you thinking?”

“Really? Wow, this is great! Sorry, I’ll calm down, um...tomorrow? I’m free after I close up, so around ten? Is that too late?”

He was babbling again, and it was endearing. Will could recognize that, even if it didn’t make full contact with his own emotions. He could still appreciate it and keep coasting.

“I don’t mind, I’m a bit of a night owl,” Will invented helpfully.

He didn’t want to talk about the fact that he didn’t really sleep, outside of stolen naps at random times of the day when his body simply shut down on him. Sometimes he wondered if one day he would do this and not wake up, and he wasn’t sure it would be such a terrible thing. Instead of
running away from the nightmares of Hannibal, he could remain forever in their dark embrace.

Get ahold of yourself for fuck’s sake. You don’t have the excuse of encephalitis anymore to be having these kinds of thoughts.

“Why don’t I meet you at Elixir after you close, and you can show me the tapas place?” Will suggested, trying to make his thoughts shut up before they argued him to death. His better angels despised his weaker, darker proclivities, and vice versa. It was remarkable that Hannibal had always loved both sides of—

Stop it, that wasn’t love. Don’t think about Hannibal.

“Perfect! It’s right down the street. So, I’ll see you then -- wait, do you want to exchange numbers? In case one of us runs late?”

“Okay,” Will shrugged. How exciting, this would be the fifteenth number in his contacts.

They traded phones briefly, then Caleb headed to the register to check out while Will continued through the aisles, hunting for the remaining items on his list. Rolls for the hot dogs...those organic biscuits that Winston loved…

By the time he checked out, he’d almost forgotten Caleb entirely, but when he remembered, he realized that during the rest of his time at the store, he’d been in a fairly decent mood, not

wanting to run and hide every time someone walked by him, not overwhelmed by the lights or annihilated by some stray pop lyric slicing with horrific accuracy into his skull. By his recent standards, Will felt much better, and when he thought about meeting up with Caleb again tomorrow, he smiled.

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“Hey stranger,” Beverly greeted casually when Will showed up in her small office, adjacent to the crime lab.

He held up a jumbo-sized box of her favorite chocolate chip granola bars and gave her something between a wince and a smile. “Peace offering?”

“Oh, accepted!” She grabbed the box and plonked it on her desk, then bent down to take something out of the minifridge beside it. “And this is for you.”

Will took the small tub of strawberry fruit-on-the-bottom yogurt and laughed softly. Now they each had the same snacks they’d shared on the first day they’d really bonded as friends in the FBI cafeteria. He mostly succeeded in blocking out all other memories of what that day had led to, for the moment.

“Now sit your ass down and tell me what you’ve been doing for the last couple of months. *How* have you been doing?”

They both knew that seeing each other briefly at crime scenes did not count as friends talking.

“Beverly,” Will began awkwardly, sitting down in the chair in front of her desk as she took the chair behind it. He peeled open the seal on the yogurt and lifted the plastic spoon. “I didn’t mean to ignore you...I mean, I wasn’t trying to shut you out--”

“I know.” She shrugged, unwrapping a granola bar. “Look, it’s perfectly normal to shut yourself off from the world after a bad break-up. I get it. The last time I had a break-up, I spent weeks on my couch watching the complete works of Reese Witherspoon while crying into my Ben and Jerry’s about how love is nothing but a cruel lie.”

She laughed, so he did, too, but her strategy from the past sounded perfectly reasonable to him.

“So how have you been?” Will asked.

“Alright, you know. Same old, but... I’ve taken up yoga!” Her eyes sparkled. “Even got Brian into it, and trust me, seeing him attempt a crane pose is an experience. I will say he looks pretty cute in cat-cow, though.”

“I’m...very happy to take your word for it,” Will noted with a wry smile.

“And you? Are you sleeping okay, eating enough? Besides ice cream and alcohol, which are required dietary staples of the broken-hearted.”

He chuckled. “I’m trying? Right now, it’s about all I can manage. I do have a *date* tonight.”

“There you go, back in the saddle.” Beverly grinned. “Who is he...or she?”

“It’s this guy Caleb, he’s a chef at Elixir in Baltimore. I ran into him at the grocery store, he asked me out, and I guess I thought...why not? Now I’m starting to question if it’s really such a good idea.”

“It’s a *great* idea, you should go out and have fun again! Plus, don’t forget, the best way to get over somebody is to get under somebody else.”

Will laughed a little harshly. “I’m over-- I’m over Hannibal.”

The name came out the same way it always did, a little too loving, a little too much like a prayer or a plea. *Hann*ibal. His Hannibal.

Don’t think about him.

“That’s even better then, you’re ready to move on.” Beverly knew Will didn’t like a lot of eye contact or to be closely surveyed, but he was still well-aware of her careful eyes choosing polite moments to track over his tired face. She was concerned, and he appreciated it, but they didn’t need words to feel the mutual respect and caring between them. It was good to talk to her again, it was healthy to have a date with someone new, so...maybe this was the start of him getting his life back together.

“Yes, I’m ready to move on,” he decided, making the words sound as firm as he wished he felt them.

Beverly gave him a playful grin. “So, what are you gonna *wear*?”

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Will found an olive-green button-down shirt that smelled okay and a pair of khakis that were recently dry-cleaned. Good so far. He trimmed his facial scruff, patted some Old Spice onto his cheeks, and let the dogs back in. They were tired and curled up contentedly on their pillows by the space-heater. Will wished he could just stay here with them and flop into bed with the covers pulled over his head. He didn’t think he’d ever seen a movie with Reese Witherspoon, so he had a lot of catching up to do, and the bottle of scotch in the kitchen was looking far more appealing than a night out. Still, he sighed in resignation to “moving on” and left for the date.

He had a panic attack as soon as he walked into Elixir, and had to duck into the bathroom to wait it out. Will was used to these attacks that hijacked his body for a nightmare ride through

hell. He remembered that he used to have them a lot when he went on his first few dates after joining the dating app. But that wasn't why he was so worked up now.

Why had he thought he could see this place again and stay in one piece? The pieces of him that still belonged to Hannibal could have kissed the floor in gratitude for the flood of memories it brought back, forbidden fruit he needed to shove away as quickly as possible.

The elegant but cozy open-plan layout of the place with its dim lighting and black tablecloths. Gentle, low-hum chatter of other patrons around them and the soft clink of plates and glasses. Hannibal, bashful against his own will and playfully flirtatious, making eyes at Will across one of those tables, their fingers tumbling over each other. The flickering play of candlelight flame over elegant cheekbones, full lips and mysterious velvety eyes shifting in shade from mahogany to red. Every way Will should have *always* known it was too good to be true.

He had come here because it would be a convenient spot for Caleb to meet up, but was that really why? He hated himself, hated his own weakness, that he did these things in some sick subconscious worship of Hannibal. Did he even love Hannibal because he *loved Hannibal*, or only because the evil therapist had riddled his brain with the thought until he couldn't excise it?

Hannibal was deranged, abusive, cruel, and above all, sick -- he made Will sick, and Will was --

It was with a perverse sense of gratitude that Will felt the end of the panic attack coming as he vomited the meager contents of his stomach up in a stall. There was no one else here; the restaurant was closed and Caleb had only left the front door open for Will. No one, not even Caleb, would know about this breakdown, but Will would know, with a fierce frustration that made him want to scream and tear the place apart.

He washed up at the sink, where there was one of those wonderfully convenient little baskets of complimentary items, toothbrushes, mini-bottles of toothpaste, facial wipes. For the first time in a while, he looked closely at his reflection in the mirror and felt that same echo of distant emotion he should feel, but couldn't connect with. Revulsion and disappointment.

He wished the outside of him looked more like he felt, like a ghost. A strange thing to wish, but somehow looking relatively decent made his emotions feel unbearably heavy on the inside, with no outlet. No place to put all the sadness, and definitely no place to put the love.

No forts in the bone arena of your skull… Annoyingly smug, sexy Lithuanian accent. Presumptuous, even invasive.

Maybe get to know me before prying open my skull, Dr. Lecter.

But that wasn't what Will had said...it was something like, "you wouldn't like me when I'm psychoanalyzed." And Hannibal had gazed at him, looking bizarrely entranced. It made something unexpected catch in Will's stomach, a curiosity that could never be fully sated--

Shut up. He yanked himself back to the present, to his reflection.

All in all, Will looked pale, wan, and a bit skinnier than he used to. Given the cause for his loss of palate, he didn't have to question why he'd gone in this direction rather than binge eating to numb the pain. Anyway, what did it matter whether there was more or less of him to love, when there was no one left to love him? No one sane would want to love the real Will, if they understood him fully, knew all the dark secrets and wicked impulses he had to smother every single day and night.

Still, he noticed the same features that people sometimes complimented him on when noting his appearance, his bright eyes that changed from green to blue depending on the lighting, his long, dark lashes and plush lips, the mop of tousled brown curls. He could smile, laugh, look alive, even. Dr. Du Maurier would have said his person suit was in good working order.

Hannibal wouldn't care, even if he wasted away. Will knew this wasn't true, but the thought gave him a satisfying jab of vengeance. He knew how much it had hurt Hannibal that day in the hospital room, when Will said that Hannibal didn't love him and never had.

If Hannibal saw him like this, lost and tangled up in his own despair, he would take care of Will. He would take him home, give him a long, soothing bubble bath and a massage, kiss him and feed him lovely, delicious things. Will wouldn't care what the food was made of, or what he and Hannibal were made of to fall back together like shattered glass, suddenly whole again. They'd talk about everything they had been through since the split, cry and laugh and hold each other. Hannibal would make love to him, gently at first, until Will's body was strong again, and then he would fuck him, exactly the way he knew Will loved to be fucked, all night long and with ruthless passionate abandon. He didn't have to stay like this, mired in this purgatory of pain and misery, he could go to Hannibal now, tonight--

"Will?" Caleb's voice echoed through the empty restaurant outside the bathroom. "You here yet?"

Will came back to reality with a shuddered gasp. "Don't!" he whispered to himself in the mirror, desperately infuriated: "Don't think about Hannibal!"

He splashed his face with warm water and verified one last time that he looked fine, done with this bullshit over his manipulative, hurtful ex and ready to learn how to live again, feel real again in the present.

Not exactly satisfied, but bitter enough to summon resolve, he called back, "Yeah, I'll be right out!"

He used a bit of water from the faucet to make his hair look a little less wild, then turned to leave. Really, it was hard to understand why Caleb wanted to go out with him; Will knew he would probably never look better than this, a watered-down facsimile of his former self.

The voice in his head whispered sweetly. It was Will's own voice, which in this instance made it worse. *Hannibal would still think you are beautiful.*

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Part Two

“Oh, Lord...please make me pure
But not yet.”
--Robbie Williams

Will sat with Caleb for an hour at the tapas bar, picking items off the lavish Spanish cheese board to crumble into tiny pieces and hide under the edge of his plate or in the extra napkin beside it. He moved his jaw periodically to vaguely simulate eating, then sipped his drink, an inspired and potent combination of bourbon, blueberry liquor, mint and ginger beer with a twist of lime. The faraway place where Will had abandoned his palate tried to report that the drink had a nice blend of flavors but was a little too sweet for his taste. He didn’t care; it was strong and it blurred his thoughts.

“You’ve gotta try one of these crab cakes, they’re out of this world,” Caleb enthused, and Will couldn’t blame him.

He’d been drawing on his empathy to mimic Caleb’s own happy enjoyment of the really very nice and tasty-looking food since it arrived. Of course Caleb would assume Will would want to try the crab cakes.

“I guess I should,” said Will because he didn’t know what else to say. He didn’t think he could get a bite of that down, but he didn’t have any excuse not to try.

“Here, let me?” Caleb asked, leaning in from his place across the table and offering Will a crab cake to taste right out of his hand.

Will looked down. Caleb’s hands were clean and neatly manicured, and he smelled the same, clean and neat, maybe Dolce and Gabbana Light Blue, the same scent Will’s ex from New Orleans used to wear. Nothing spicy, overly expensive or pretentious, not like--

Don’t think about--

Will looked down at the crab cake, which was encrusted with buttery breadcrumbs. *If I’m ever going to move on, I’ve got to make more of an effort to be healthy.* He gave in and took a bite, registering the slight quiver in Caleb’s fingers when his lips inevitably brushed the other man’s skin.

It felt nice, to have someone want him like that, damn good to touch and be touched, a little exciting to feel that quiver of tense possibility in the air.

“Mmm,” Will smiled, chewing slowly and carefully, then managing to swallow in a moment of great personal victory. He was sure the food tasted amazing, but to him it was just a big, crunchy-soft bite of absolutely nothing. That didn’t matter, though. Maybe he could be normal long enough that his taste buds would return to active duty.

“Right?” Caleb grinned with a wink.

Their conversation progressed from funny comments about shared childhood pop culture nostalgia, Nintendo and Return of the Jedi lunchboxes, to the regular sorts of things one felt compelled to discuss on a first date, such as work.

“It’s more of a moral calling, an obligation, than anything fueled by ambition,” Will explained. “I can do this thing, profile these killers, and I have to do it.”

“So you’re saving lives,” Caleb breathed, “That’s amazing, Will. It must take a lot out of you, though. Jesus, I can’t believe I’ve been sitting here complaining about rude customers and the market prices on lobsters when you’re out there every day being a total hero.”

“Oh, please, no I’m not,” Will laughed, nibbling a few soft cheese wedges and green olives because he wanted to stay alert and involved in the conversation. He was enjoying himself now, with Caleb. “Who says you’re not a hero, anyway? People need great food in a welcoming setting, they need to unwind and have fun, connect with each other. You give that to them. Sounds pretty heroic to me.”

Caleb blushed again. “Sorry, give me a minute, I’m fine, it’s just...thank you, I…”

“You okay?” Will laughed gently.

“I have the biggest crush on you,” Caleb confided. “I just had to get that out, I know it’s silly. I barely know you, but ever since that first night at the restaurant, I just think...you’re striking and sweet, smart and...I never thought I would actually go out with you...oh, God, what am I saying? I’m being way too much. Strike this from the record, please.”

“No, I won’t,” Will said warmly, pushing past the obvious falsehood of Caleb’s utterly sincere compliments. Why did people always think that Will was *nice*? Even now, he was letting himself enjoy Caleb’s attraction to him without fully reciprocating it, just because he needed to be touched and brought out of himself again, and that was selfish.

The least he could do was admit to Caleb that he was on the rebound and needed to take it very slow, but instead, he took Caleb’s hand over the table and ran a finger over the other man’s knuckles.

“I think it’s amazing that you can open up like that and speak your mind,” he said truthfully. “It’s not too often I meet someone like you. What are you doing single, anyway?”

He pretended to himself that he felt the words as deeply as Caleb obviously did, and that was lovely, the idea of it.

“Waiting for you,” Caleb laughed, laying a joking sing-song tone onto the words. But from the light in his pretty green eyes and the way his fingers threaded through Will’s, Will knew Caleb wasn’t entirely kidding.

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At the end of the night, they sat in Caleb’s car for a little while, in the parking lot of the tapas place. They went on talking and laughing and Will felt himself slipping further away from the danger of his truest thoughts. Caleb’s knee bumped into Will’s at one point and their eyes locked, then Caleb reached out and tentatively brushed Will’s face with the backs of his fingers.

“Can I?” he asked, and Will kissed him first, taking in the tantalizing warmth of soft lips and the slight prickliness of Caleb’s beard.

Caleb sighed and took Will’s face in both hands, kissing him more deeply. He didn’t kiss the way Will did, or the way Will liked to be kissed, in a slowly savoring manner that progressed from soft to hot and hard, with sucking and biting coming just at the right moment to turn him inside out and make him forget everything else. Caleb actually kissed a little too hard and fast right away, and he didn’t seem to know how to use his tongue for anything besides sort of stabbing as deep into Will’s mouth as he could get. But Will hadn’t been touched in four months and he was in no position to complain that this sweetheart of a man needed kissing tutorials at some point, when it might be polite and acceptable to bestow them. This wasn’t the moment.

“Wow,” Caleb smiled when they pulled back, “I had such a great time with you.”

Will nodded, letting Caleb’s enthusiasm become his own. “We should do it again sometime.”

***

A few more dates, first an Italian restaurant, then a sushi place, then Greek. Will got at least a little food down every time. He started paying attention to the menu as something other than an enemy, and found the softest items that would melt unobtrusively in his mouth, leaving him free to look at Caleb’s happy smile and try to absorb his mood. After a while, maybe a few more dates, Will would feel it too, surely. They were perfectly compatible, what more could Will really ask? Caleb listened to all his work woes (the safe version of the stories, of course, sans visions of black stags and wendigos, or feeling like he was the killer himself, enacting his grisly, beautiful design) with patient concern. He knew how to use humor to diffuse Will’s moments of stiff unease or nervousness, and had plenty of ideas for great restaurants to try. He never tried to get Will to go to big parties or concerts, or anything else that would make Will want to crawl back under the rock he once called home. Caleb still kissed awkwardly and at all the wrong angles, but his mouth and his arms were warm, his words sweet, murmuring about Will’s body and the way he tasted until Will reciprocated, and

things seemed to be progressing well physically, despite Will lagging behind in the emotional department.

A few more dates and several light, cheery phone calls, plenty of texting during the day. It would be easy to get Caleb to slow down; he had made it easy. Will could take longer to call or text back; he could end the kissing sooner or move Caleb's hands back up to his face when they wandered. Instead, Will kept up the same pace, mirroring Caleb's moves in the courtship. He wanted to see what would happen.

On the fifth date, Caleb invited Will to his house for dinner. He made Maryland blue crab with garlic smashed potatoes and zesty coleslaw, and poured Will a glass of cold Chardonnay. When Will twisted the crabs open and sucked out the meat with practiced skill, Caleb raised his eyebrows, impressed. Will licked his lips and winked.

There was carrot cake for dessert, and then Caleb chirped up with "Hey, I never gave you a tour of the place!"

Caleb's ex had definitely been right about the whole chainsaw thing. Will smothered a laugh at the blatant intention of getting him into the bedroom, putting on a seamless act of admiring the various rooms in Caleb's high-end apartment. It was a typical bachelor pad, not much in the way of decoration; cozy enough with nice furniture and a set of red pots and pans in the kitchen. Useful enough, in terms of the king-sized bed beside which Caleb paused and took Will's mouth in a long kiss. Will had ceased attempting to participate much in the kisses, since any attempt to adjust the pace or sweep his own tongue against Caleb's just seemed to lead to more hard presses of Caleb's lips or those thrusting tongue-stabs to which he had by now become even affectionately accustomed.

He didn't let himself consider that the affection was disappointingly *friendly*, not when he was this close to getting Caleb's hands on his body and come on now! Caleb was a very sexy guy, despite the middle school-level kissing abilities, and they both deserved to have some fun, to feel full intimacy. They were, after all, so perfectly compatible.

The kiss went on long enough that at the appropriate moment, Will fell back on the bed, dragging Caleb down on top of him. Caleb moaned and Will didn't think about Hannibal. Instead, he made a doomed attempt at making the kiss more playful and sensuous, which ended once again in surrender to Caleb's insistently blunt force method. He ran his fingers up the back of Caleb's shirt, feeling his warm, smooth skin without being reminded of anyone else. Trailing his fingers down Caleb's back, he let his nails drag slightly harder into Caleb's skin at the same time he stole a spare breath between kisses to nibble Caleb's neck.

"Oh! You like it kind of rough, huh?" Caleb looked down at Will with a grin.

"Is...that a problem?"

"Not at all." Caleb kissed him again, and Will didn't let out an ironic and ill-timed laugh at the thought of anyone terming those tiny aggressions as "rough." Compared to…

Compared to nothing.

Will locked his legs around Caleb and ground up against the hardness growing beneath Caleb's trousers. "Oh, fuck," Caleb gasped, nosing into Will's neck. That was nice, almost like…

Don't think about Hannibal.

"Fuck, you're so gorgeous, Will." Caleb licked at Will's low neck and across his collarbone, fingers running through Will's curls, and as Caleb locked his lips tighter to suck at Will's skin, all Will could think was *If Hannibal ever knew that someone else marked me...if I showed him…*

Will hadn't been hard up until now, but he was starting to get there. Shivers ran through him as he threw his head back. He moved Caleb's hand to his chest and Caleb massaged him through his t-shirt, finding a nipple and teasing it with his thumb.

"Mmm," Will said, but he wasn't sure where to look. Belatedly, he realized looking at Caleb wasn't going to do it for him. In this particular moment of heated arousal and the thrill of being touched again, he refused to analyze the instinct. Instead, he clamped his eyes shut and added, "take off my shirt."

Caleb tugged the shirt up over Will's head with a gasp. "So fucking gorgeous," he sighed, licking Will's nipple and proving that his oral attentions were much better when he applied them to other areas than Will's mouth.

"Hnnnh," Will gritted out, thrusting into Caleb's palm when it landed on his groin.

"Will," Caleb breathed against Will's increasingly damp skin, covered in more kisses, light bites and sucking the more Will encouraged him with moans getting more high-pitched by the second. "You're beautiful."

"So are you," Will said with his eyes still closed, barely shutting out the images trying to intrude, the memories.

Caleb rested a hand on Will's trousers' button and asked, "is this okay?"

"Yes," Will almost whimpered. He hadn't even been able to jerk off since the break-up because there was only one person he could masturbate to who could get him there, and he wasn't allowed anymore. But now, since there was someone else here, someone else Will could give pleasure to in exchange for his own, maybe it would be okay to let go, no matter what other thoughts or images --

Don't think about him.

Caleb kissed all along Will's low belly just above his trousers' waistband and then undid the pants and pushed them down, leaving Will's underwear intact for now.

"I'd die to be inside you," Caleb said with throaty, ardent sincerity, and that was what pushed Will past caring.

Caleb had no idea how literal his words would become, if Hannibal ever knew they'd done this, that Will had been in his bed, underneath him, undressed and touched, kissed all over...groped and…

Something that had been riveted tightly inside Will hit its breaking point and Will let out a choked half-sob.

He thought about Hannibal.

Hannibal kissing his erection through his underwear, stroking his thighs and leaning in to bite them a little. Running fingers through Hannibal's hair and tugging possessively, living for every desperate sound he could drag from his lover's lips. Hannibal rising back up to tease him more, dipping his tongue into Will's belly button, tracing his hip bones with worshipful devotion. Caleb was saying something else, but Will heard husky words of love in Lithuanian and French, and he saw Hannibal looking up at him with those liquid amber eyes, grinning with those sharp, deadly fangs. Switching back to English because he would make sure Will understood every word of his next statement, *"I'm going to make you come so hard it hurts, Will."*

"Yes, yes, please, I need you so much," Will cried out, his hips bucking rhythmically as Hannibal slid his hands under Will's ass and squeezed his cheeks. "So good, please…"

More kisses with the wrong pressure and angle, so Will turned his face away and restored his vision, Hannibal biting his neck until it hurt, pinching Will's nipple and groping his ass with hungry, fervent greed.

"Oh, God." Will grabbed for a hard, tensed, strong bicep and dug his fingers in. "God, H--han-"

Everything stopped. Time, Will's heart, the fantasy. There was just one suspended moment of confusion as he opened his eyes and Caleb looked down at him in dazed bewilderment shifting into dismay.

He hadn't said Hannibal's full name, but Caleb wasn't an idiot. He'd said enough.

Will's conscience flared and he felt awful. "I'm sorry," he said, shaking his head. "I'm sorry, Caleb. I didn't mean to, I…"

"It's okay," Caleb said with a smile that looked painful. He got off the bed and ran a hand through his hair, which had been rendered messy by Will's eager hands.

Will got up too, standing on the opposite side of the bed out of respect. "I wouldn't blame you if you never want to see me again. I don't know why I started to say that…"

Liar.

"I totally get it, you had a bad break-up, your heart hasn't fully healed, and in the heat of the moment, you started to blurt out...his name. It makes sense." Caleb was resigned. He picked up a few throw pillows from the floor and shrugged. "I don't know what I expected."

Will winced. “But you’re amazing. Anyone would be lucky to be with you.”

Caleb laughed, self-conscious and mildly annoyed and quickly forgiving. “Thanks, Will. Ahhh, come here.” He put out his arms and Will went into them for a hug. “It’s really okay. Maybe we can take a break and try this again sometime when you’ve had more time to move on. You can call me anytime, alright?”

Will felt like his previous accomplishments in awkwardness had been soundly defeated by this incident, which left him feeling unforgivably selfish and possibly deranged. How could he ruin a potentially great new relationship by vocally pining for his abusive asshole of an ex-boyfriend? What the hell was wrong with him?

Still, he patted Caleb’s back and pulled away gently, with a rueful smile as if he was a normal person and someday any of this would make sense. “Alright. Thank you for understanding.”

***

Will stood outside Hannibal’s house at midnight in the pouring rain, a bottle of cheap whiskey in one fist. His other hand was busy digging nails into his palm as the liquor burned his throat and the rain pelted him. It was not a baptismal shower but a much-deserved punishment. He’d come here tonight after the humiliating mishap with Caleb to make himself suffer. To force himself to remember he was pining for a monster. Not to think about charging up to the door and slamming his fists against it until they were bloodied and raw or until Hannibal answered, whatever came first. When Hannibal opened up, Will would fall against him and beg to be loved until he forgot what lonely felt like.

For the folly of these thoughts, Will deserved to suffer, and he did. It felt like swallowing razor blades to look at that austere house where they had shared so many happy memories, where Will had been driven to senseless devotion by Hannibal’s wicked manipulation. It wasn’t love, it had never been love; it just felt so much like it that Will wanted to scream.

But that would bring Hannibal to him, and Will didn’t deserve that either; to end this night collapsed in the lap of sweetly forbidden comfort. He needed to repent of the temptation before it once again swallowed him whole. *Take this from me*, he begged the God he only half believed in, or relied on as yet another falsely soothing fantasy. *The love, the need, the selfishness and the way it could hurt others, take it all away. Make me clean again; I’m festering with the grit of it. I’m on the verge of becoming something terrible and frightening. I’m afraid of myself.*

God did nothing, which was his usual play. Hannibal might have found it amusing, wasn’t God and his perpetual inaction, his parade of lying promises of salvation, Hannibal’s favorite joke? Will laughed, then Hannibal laughed, the version of him who lived in Will’s head.

“It’s rude to sneak up on people,” Will said without looking at the figure beside him. He didn’t need to look to feel the heady but false warmth of his presence, the smell of fine

cologne and rich wine on the air, to know the impact of Hannibal's subtle smile and graceful movements.

"I abhor nothing more than rudeness as you know. But if I don't sneak up on you, I'll have no chance to converse with you at all. You've been trying to drive me out of your mind."

"Oh, fuck you, Hannibal." Will took a half-hearted swig of whiskey and turned on the vision of his ex, resplendent in the moonlight in his perfectly fitted plaid three-piece suit, with his silvery hair falling softly across his brow just the way Will liked it. "This isn't a real conversation, you're just stuck in my brain because of how brilliantly you dedicated yourself to driving *me* out of my mind. You thought you could gradually erode my morality, and replace it with your own vision of who I should be. What's worse than that? Yes, I've tried to *evict* you. But here you fucking are, you know? When does it end?"

"With me?" Hannibal arched his light brows and gave a small shrug. "It usually ends bloody."

The rain soon began to ruin Hannibal's suit, plastering it to his skin as Will stood watching and shivering. Hannibal closed his eyes and lifted his face up to let himself get soaked, and he was heart-breakingly gorgeous, long eyelashes and gleaming cheekbones with water running off them, pretty lips curved into a slightly more overt smile.

"I used to dream about kissing you in the rain," Will admitted, hugging himself as the reality of the whole "standing outside your ex-boyfriend's house in the rain to make yourself miserable" thing started to take its toll. He was soaked to the bone and freezing.

"You could still have any dream with me you like, make it come true. I would love nothing more than to kiss you now, and everyday forever."

"I--" Will shuddered against a suppressed sob. "Why can't you understand?"

Hannibal stepped closer and cupped Will's cheek, stroking over his clammy skin with a sadder look. "Why can't you?"

"You're not going anywhere, are you?" Will chuckled snidely. "I'm stuck with you. I guess I'll just have to learn to live with that."

"All I really wanted was to help you learn how to live, how to accept happiness. Open up to your deepest inner truths, to know I would still find you beautiful, even more beautiful, for your darkest, most brutal thoughts, the ones that send you hiding behind your glasses and tweed, behind textbooks and Jack Crawford. None of it can save you."

Will sighed and entertained a brief fantasy of smashing the bottle into bits, leaving a wide wet stain of whiskey dotted with glass on the edge of Hannibal's front drive. It would be satisfying but too much like an invitation. Hannibal would know it was him.

In his therapy with Bedelia, Will hasn't said a word about the break up beyond announcing that it had occurred. He kept their sessions focused on work, insistently avoiding any mention

of Hannibal, but now he felt that if he ever wanted to get over this..he was going to have to deal with it. He'd have to confront the emotion maturely.

Someday, perhaps even soon, Will decided, he would do that. Someday he would be strong, but not tonight.

"Come on," he murmured to Hannibal's ghost. He didn't bother arguing with the man's equal parts impeccable and obnoxious reasoning. "Let's go home."

He hadn't had enough whiskey to get drunk, so he got back into his car and drove to Wolf Trap, knowing exactly what he would do when he got there. He hated it, but he knew.

***

Abigail had been around to feed the dogs earlier and left a note for him on the counter, just "hope you had fun!" And a few smiley faces. Will knew she would much rather he be with Hannibal, completing her vision of the new family they had almost found together. But she cared enough about Will to mask her disappointment with cheer.

Will crumpled the note because he didn't deserve that either, then he went to the closet and reached for the piece of contraband stowed away on the top shelf.

He had thrown almost everything else away, even the red rose petals carefully pressed into his old book and the huge cardboard heart shaped box which had originally been filled with candy. Will had used it to store the movie ticket stubs and the precious incidental notes Hannibal had left him, the photos of them together which Will had prints made of, like an idiot, thinking these were moments he would want to cherish forever. He'd purged himself of it, smashed them into the garbage, but he hadn't been able to face the other remnants of Hannibal, so they stayed untouched in the closet. There were the clothes Hannibal had given Will, the dapper, slim-fitting suit he had special made and the pair of ridiculous designer jeans. And the large teddy bear on the top shelf. Hannibal had given it to Will on their one month anniversary. He clutched it helplessly.

Will looked at the bear's joyful smile and big brown eyes and crumpled, body and soul. He fell into bed and curled up with the bear crushed against him and cried himself to sleep, his throat and eyes sore, but his entire being finally grateful, because he had started letting some of this emotion out. It felt like venting to an unfeeling universe, but it was all he had left. Now that he had started to feel again, he knew it was dangerous, too much for him to handle, boding toxically bad, but still, it was hard to say when he would be able to stop.

"It was real," he whispered to himself, finally letting the realization take hold. He'd known it all along, even after the truth came out, but he didn't want to face it, had tried to class Hannibal's love a lie to save himself. Now this simple truth was the only thing he could understand as more tears streamed down his face and he spoke around the lump in his throat, nuzzling tighter into the stuffed bear's head. "It was *real*."

***

Hannibal thought he had heard something outside, in the front drive perhaps. He closed his book and glanced at the clock as everything inside him suddenly quickened, an almost nauseating, but enlivening flood of excitement. It was just after midnight.

He nearly ran for the door, thinking he was probably dreaming. He must have fallen asleep in his armchair by the fire as he so often did these days, pretending to feel again the warm pressure of Will's head leaning against his leg, pretending he could easily reach down and run his fingers through tousled chocolate curls. Imagining soon they would stir and go up to bed, then wear each other out until morning.

Hannibal had a recurring dream of late, that Will would come to him in the night, would want him again, would see him fully and still want every part of him. The waiting was an absurd, embarrassing ritual, but it had become as obsessive as everything else about his feelings for Will.

Wrenching the door open, he found the front yard and drive way abandoned. His heart seemed to disintegrate, leaving nothing but a gnawing pain in the space it once occupied beneath his ribs.

Silently cursing his own idiocy, he slammed the door shut again and stalked to the library. He grabbed up the scalpel from his desk and sat down in his usual chair, then sank the small blade deep into the leather armrest, once, twice, slowly at first, methodically. He stared into the fire until he was nearly blind, his eyes as hollow as his new existence. Then a hot wash of rage took over and he stabbed the chair again and again, rendering the arm rest a disaster of ruined leather and stuffing.

He had considered having himself hypnotized to shake free of the irritating dreams, the humiliating remnants of love for someone who obviously couldn't stomach who Hannibal was at his core. But he would miss the dreams. There was no way to entirely excise or repress Will from his life, he instinctively knew. It would be like trying to erase a scar, then finding the wound reopened and bloodier than ever within minutes.

It upset his carefully constructed and guarded sense of personal superiority over the universe to know as he did that although he was falling apart over Will, the feeling was completely unreciprocated.

Will was brilliantly versed in psychology, and he knew the right ways to recover from a trauma. Discuss it in therapy. Forgive himself for being fooled. Stop blaming himself for Hannibal's manipulations and lies. Find positive outlets, hobbies and friends, to pool his energy into until he began to heal. Will would know all this, so he was hardly going to dwell on thoughts of the monster who had ruined his life, not when he was still young and vital and more than worthy of beginning anew. Hannibal pressed his thumb hard against the sharp edge of the scalpel until he drew blood, but the pain couldn't wipe away a single jot of his

emotional upset. If he didn’t know better, he would have admitted to himself that the indomitable Hannibal Lecter might be having a breakdown.

All he knew was this, that somewhere tonight, Will was most likely recovered and moving on with his life. And he was most certainly not thinking about Hannibal.

Chapter End Notes

Fic title taken from the Halsey song.

My next addition to the series will be some well-earned fluffy smut for Will and Hannibal. Thanks for reading and despite the pain...hope you enjoyed! <3

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